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ABSTRACT

An exploratory study was conducted to evaluate a model that predicts a five-step developmental sequence from dualistic to systematic conceptions of racism among young white adults. The model predicts developmental changes for white middle-class young adults within the context of a college cultural-diversity course. The following steps in understanding are predicted: (1) individual prejudice; (2) individual prejudice conflicted; (3) recognition of a multiplicity of inequalities; (4) coordination of a partial system of inequality; and (5) understanding of social and systemic racism. Subjects were 55 white college students (45 female and 10 male) in a cultural-diversity course required of education majors. The majority did respond at step 1 at the beginning of the course and saw racism as simply a matter of individual prejudice. None of the students reached a step-5 conceptualization, but the average student did gain one step, and more than a quarter made two- or three-step gains. The data support a cognitive dimension to the problem of coming to grips with racism. Two tables and one figure present study findings. (Contains 48 references.) (SLD)

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DEVELOPING CONCEPTIONS OF RACISM AMONG YOUNG WHITE ADULTS IN THE CONTEXT OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY COURSEWORK

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RUNNING HEAD: ADULT CONCEPTIONS OF RACISM

This paper is based upon presentations made at the Society for Research in Adult Development annual meeting, Amherst, June, 1993, and at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, April, 1994. The authors would like to thank Britta Davis, Laura McIntyre, and Lee Raymond Whitman for their contributions to the ideas and research presented here.

Introduction

Recent years have seen a growing awareness of the multi-racial, multi-ethnic character of U.S. society and the problems of social justice associated with such socio-cultural diversity. Rising incidents of racially motivated violence and other signs of growing racial tensions have led to a national concern for developing competence among young adults in relating across barriers of racial and ethnic difference (as well as differences of gender, class, religion, sexual orientation, age, physical abilities, etc.). Many institutions including major employers as well as colleges and universities are instituting specific courses in race relations and socio-cultural diversity (Heller, 1992; Osajima, 1991; Singh, 1991). Interventions such as these are typically based on an assumption that a major factor in improved racial and intercultural relations is the ability to understand racism and other forms of social injustice. Yet, there has been very little research directed specifically at describing or measuring growth in adult's understanding of such social justice issues.

One reason for this gap in the research is a lack of theoretical models and measurement tools specifically aimed at the assessment of understanding in the domain of social justice reasoning. Instead, most cognitively oriented research in this area has been aimed at assessing inter-racial attitudes. While attitudes are certainly an important part of race-relations, attitudinal models and measures do not directly address the way in which individuals conceptualize a problem like racism or how such conceptions might change. Many white students, for example, who have been raised in mostly-white suburbs by liberal parents, hold generally positive attitudes toward other races (despite unconscious biases) as compared with many working class whites who have grown up believing other races to be

direct threats to their job opportunities. Yet, both the liberal-suburban and the working class white students may have very similar conceptions of what racism is and what role they themselves play in it. Both groups of students may lack the ability to analyze the ways in which their own background, position in society, and place in the history of U.S. race relations have contributed to their own experience of race and their current position with regard to individuals of other races. To analyze the nature of a complex social justice issue like racism and to grasp one's own place within it is a difficult conceptual task, not just a matter of attitude. Indeed, the ability to act upon attitudes or perceptions about a problem may depend on the way a person conceives of the problem and his or her role in it.

The literature on adult cognitive development gives us good reason to suppose that during the early years of adulthood--a period at which many interventions are aimed--conceptions of complex social justice issues like racism may undergo a development from rather simplistic notions to more complex conception better suited to the complexity of the issue. Since Perry's (1970) account of developmental growth from dualistic, right-wrong conceptions of knowledge to relativistic conceptions of multiple viewpoints in college students there has been a growing literature supporting the view that young adults in college settings undergo systematic cognitive growth in the ability to understand and analyze complex problems involving multiple, even contradictory dimensions of reality (Kitchener & Fischer, 1990; Kitchener & King, 1981; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). Although researchers have begun to applied these models to the domain of social justice reasoning through correlation studies or pre-post assessment, (Adams & Zhou-McGovern, 1994; Taylor, 1990), there has been virtually no research aimed specifically at describing

developmental changes in adult conceptions of social justice problems such as racism.

The present research is an exploratory study designed to help fill the gap in our knowledge of how young adults develop conceptualizations of complex social justice issues by focusing on the specific problem of racism. The main purpose of the study was to evaluate a model, based on the work of Perry (1970) and others (Fischer, Hand & Russell, 1984; Kitchener & King, 1981), that predicts a five step developmental sequence from dualistic to systematic conceptions of racism among young white adults. The model is both population- and context-specific, predicting developmental changes for white middle class young adults in the specific context of college cultural diversity coursework.

The decision to focus on young white adults was motivated by two considerations. First, as white researchers, we were sensitive to a pattern of white social scientists treating persons of color as "problem" populations (Edwards, 1994). Since persons of color are primarily the victims of racism, it seemed that the goal of understanding how racism is perpetuated would be better served by first learning about the extent to which white students could understand the nature of the problem and conceptualize their own role in it.

Secondly, the young white adult population has been a specific focus of concern among educational administrators, social workers, and counseling professionals who work closely with race relations. These professionals have long recognized that racism and other forms of oppression cannot be adequately explained by simple acts of individual prejudice or stereotypical thinking (Terry, 1970). Racism is inextricably bound up with the inequalities in our social system and, by virtue of this, exhibits systematic properties. It is the effects of racism as a system of advantage and oppression based on race--not random acts of

thoughtless or even evil individuals--that are most detrimental. Yet, these professional groups have reported a particular reticence or resistance on the part of many whites to recognizing the widespread and systemic character of racial oppression in U.S. society and their own possible relationship to it (Helms, 1990; Osajima, 1991; Sleeter, 1992; Tatum, 1992).

However, in delimiting the present focus we do not mean to imply that a study of young white adults will exhaust the subject. A long-term goal of the present line of research is comparative description of the similarities and differences across racial and ethnic groups in the development of concepts of racism.

Previous Approaches to Whites' Understanding of Racism

There have been two major approaches to understanding white responses to racism. The first of these approaches applies theories and methods of social psychology and personality theory to the study of stable individual traits or differences (Allport, 1954/1979; Christie & Jahoda, 1954), characterizing white views of race and racism in terms attitudes and personality factors. The second approach, applies models of identity development to the question, portraying white viewpoints about race and racism as a function of racial identity.

From the social psychology viewpoint, whites peoples' ideas about racism have often been interpreted in terms of individual attitudes or "perceptions" which are seen as the basis of the problem. Social psychologists such as Allport (1954/1979) also point to the emotional reasons behind investment in one's own "in-group" that lead to scape-goating of "out-groups". This perspective sees whites as having acquired stereotypes through misinformation, media images, or over-generalizations of negative experiences with other races. These stereotypes or negative attitudes are resistant to counter examples because such examples do

not fit with the individual's experience or pre-conceptions. For instance, Colin and Preciphs (1991) write that

> Racism is rooted in dysfunctional belief systems resulting from distorted perceptions formed over a period of time...Therefore, the images that whites have of non-white groups have been so ingrained that questions of validity simply do not arise...When there is continued reinforcement through miseducation, the negative perceptual process is strengthened (p. 63).

Thus, white resistance to learning about racism stems primarily from the tenacity of stereotypes and mis-information, or from the desire to preserve "in-group" status.

While this point of view captures an important dimension of the origin and maintenance of racism, its portrayal of the problem tends to be static. It tends to focus attention on the stability of personality "traits," stereotyped attitudes, and social status, to the neglect of ways in which individuals can gradually change and evolve out of these positions. By itself, this perspective can lead to a sense of hopelessness about the pervasiveness of racism in our society and ourselves. To effectively intervene in young adults' development, we need models that can serve as a map to guide educational and clinical practitioners through the longer-term processes of active personal change involved in becoming aware of the nature of racism as a social problem and of one's own place within that problem.

One approach to personal growth in relation to the problem of racism has emerged out of the experience of clinicians and researchers who have approached the problem from the point of view of identity development (Cross, 1978; Helms, 1985, 1990; Phinney, 1990; Phinney & Rosenthal, 1993; Tatum, 1992). Theories of racial identity development describe

individual growth in terms of stages moving from low awareness and/or acceptance of one's racial or ethnic identity to high awareness and acceptance. Although these models initially focused on the development of positive racial identity among persons of color (Jackson, 1976; Cross, 1978; Parham, 1989; Phinney & Rosenthal, 1993), similar models have recently been advanced for white identity as well (Hardiman, 1982; Helms, 1985, 1990; Ponterotto, 1988). These models recognize different developmental pathways in this domain based on responses to differential social status. Whereas for persons of color identity development involves overcoming detrimental adaptation of the self to the assignment of subordinate social status, for whites it has to do with rectifying the distortions of the self emerging from adaptation to a socially assigned status of dominance. Thus, positive racial identity development for both whites and persons of color is portrayed as a process of recovery from the negative effects of a racist society. The highest stage for whites is where they are "secure with their own racial identity and appreciative of cultural differences...on both a cognitive and affective level" (Ponterotto, 1988).

From the point of view of identity development theory, one reason why many white students seem to resist learning about racism is that such learning challenges their current racial identities without offering them positive alternatives (Tatum, 1992). Recognition of the systematic ways in which persons of color are socially subordinated implies recognition of the ways in which whites are systematically advantaged, and thus confronts white students with their own role, whether passive or not, in the reproduction of a social injustice. Since few people would ever want to see themselves as contributing to the mistreatment of others, many white students "resist" learning about the social complexities of racism, interpreting

such discussions as indictments of whites. In this view, white students' learning about racism can be enhanced by positive white anti-racist role models (Tatum, in press, 1992) who can help students to see possibilities for acting against racism in their own lives, and thus see the possibility of a positive racial identity.

A Cognitive Developmental Approach

Although we agree substantially with the racial identity development model, we believe that there is an important cognitive component in white students' responses to racism, which needs explication and analysis. In order for whites to formulate and act upon a positive racial identity, they must be able to grasp intellectually the systemic nature of social injustice, and their own relationship to it. In other words, before individuals can take positive action against racial injustice they must be able to understand something of how the system functions within the larger system, and how they as individuals came to be assigned the role. These are complex issues, involving the integration of multiple perspectives and dimensions of social reality. Nor surprisingly, the growth in adult identity described in the racial identity development literature (Helms, 1990; Hardiman & Jackson, 1992; Cross, 1978) shows clear parallels with the kinds of growth in complexity of thinking commonly described in the literature on adult cognitive development (e.g., Labouvie-Vief, 1982, 1992).

Researchers in adult cognitive development have documented developmental progressions from relatively simple abstract conceptual abilities toward more systemic, relativistic forms of thought. A common finding has been that systemic and relativistic concepts are hard-won acquisitions which are constructed gradually, over a period ranging from late adolescence through early adulthood, as individuals attempt to make sense of their

educational and life experiences (Perry, 1970; Kitchener & King, 1981; Shuell, 1990). Sequential qualitative changes in the organization of thinking have been documented, from simple isolated abstractions to increasingly more effective and complex conceptions which take into account systematic relations among a number of variables, in domains such as moral reasoning (Brabeck, 1983; Kohlberg & Kramer, 1969; Kurfiss, 1977; Rest, 1986), conceptions of the nature of knowledge (Perry, 1970; Kitchener & King, 1981; Belenky, et. al. 1986) and logical reasoning itself (Basseches, 1982; Fischer, Hand, & Russell, 1984; Moshman & Timmons, 1982).

A few researchers have used measures of moral development in an attempt to evaluate developmental change in the domain of social justice reasoning. Adams (1992; 1994), applied Rest's (1986) DIT measure of cognitive-moral development to the assessment of students' cognitive growth in cultural diversity coursework in which racial and other forms of oppression were central topics. She reported significant gains in cognitive moral growth over the course of one semester, especially among third- and fourth-year students. Other researchers have demonstrated that higher levels of racial "tolerance" are positively correlated with higher scores on Kohlberg's moral reasoning (Avery, 1989) and Perry's scheme of intellectual development (Taylor, 1990).

A limitation of this general approach, however, is that moral development measures like the DIT or Kohlberg's scale assesses only general cognitive-moral growth, leaving unaddressed the question of the specific ways in which young adults conceptualize particular issues such as racism, or the ways in which such conceptualization may change as they integrate new information and viewpoints. Despite the wealth of developmental research on

how adults reason about complex scientific problems about the morality of social justice issues, we know of no developmental research that specifically addresses the ways in which adults actually conceive of complex social justice problems such as racism.

The purpose of the present work is begin filling that gap in the literature by analyzing white college students' conceptualizations of racism developmentally, distinguishing each of the major steps in the process by which they gradually construct an understanding of the complexities of the problem, within a context supportive of such development. Our own and our colleagues' experience with cultural diversity courses in which racial, gender, and other forms of oppression are central topics, suggests that college students of all races and ethnicities do undergo conceptual development in relation to these topics as they struggle to integrate multiple viewpoints and dimensions of social justice issues into their own conceptual frameworks. In the present study, we begin with a focus on white college students for the reasons discussed above.

White Students' Conceptualization of Racism:

A Constructive-Developmental Model

The present approach applies adult cognitive developmental theory to the analysis of the process by which white students "make sense" of racism, and how their conceptualizations change in the context of coursework on cultural diversity. The model draws heavily on the work Perry (1970), who described adult cognitive development in terms of series of levels or "positions" that individuals construct for themselves by actively integrating new information and viewpoints to arrive at new perspectives. Drawing upon Perry's general framework, our classroom experience, and informal interviews with students,

we have generated a model of the developmental progression by which many of our white middle class students seem to construct an understanding of the concept of systematic racism. The model describes a sequence of developmental steps, each representing a position or viewpoint that students construct by integrating new ideas into the views they had held at the previous step, as they try to make sense of racism as a systemic phenomenon, in the context of a course on cultural diversity.

It is important to note that this model is highly context- and domain specific. Following contemporary contextualist theory in development (Bidell & Fischer, 1992; Rogoff, 1990; Steenbarger, 1991), this model aims at describing cognitive development only in the restricted domain of social justice reasoning and only in the specific context of cultural diversity coursework in which social justice issues (e.g., racism, sexism) are a central part of the course content. From both a contextualist and constructivist perspective, it would be unwise to look for evidence of the development of complex conceptions of racism outside of those contexts in which individuals are actively thinking about it and attempting to make sense of it in their lives. Moreover, depending on the context in which one is thinking and the nature of the information and contextual support available, individuals may construct very different--but equally complex--conceptualizations of the problem following quite different sequences of viewpoints enroute. Thus developmental pathways other than the one hypothesized here, leading to different conceptions of the problem, seem both possible and likely. The goal of the present study is simply to articulate and evaluate a developmental sequence for one group of interest in one context of interest. To reiterate, the present model does not claim to predict development of conceptions of racism for other groups or other

contexts.

Predicted Developmental Sequence

The model predicts that white college students typically pass through a series of positions or viewpoints, which we refer to as "steps," as they reconstruct their conceptualizations of racism within the framework of cultural diversity coursework. Beginning with simple abstract concepts similar to Perry's "dualisms," the students grapple with new ideas and information that contradicts or is not represented in their current conceptions. Gradually, they construct increasingly complex ways of seeing the problem. The predicted sequence of developmental steps is described below, and summarized in Table 1.

Step 1: Individual Prejudice. Thinking about racism is characterized by simple dualistic conceptions of the problem expressed through bi-polar categories such as victim/victimizer or racist/non-racist. Complex dimensions of the problem are assimilated to such dualisms without recognition of specific relations between such categories or their place in any larger social pattern. Racism is defined as a property of an individual who thinks or acts in racially prejudicial ways toward others, without reference to other larger social patterns such as racial dominance, patterns of economic injustice, etc. A dichotomy is drawn between "us" who are "unprejudiced" and "them" who are racist due to their prejudice, and responsibility for the problem is projected entirely on "them."

Step 2: Individual Prejudice Conflicted. At this step, individuals begin to recognize the limitations of their dualistic views through encounters with alternative viewpoints or with inconsistent evidence—e.g., if anyone can be racist toward anyone else, why does the problem so often seem to involve white prejudice against other races? Why are Blacks

demanding affirmative action? Why do some of my teachers say that whites are more privileged and powerful in society? The advance at Step 2 is simply the ability to recognize a problem with one's dualistic view of the problem. Students at Step 2 identify aspects of the problem beyond those captured by simple bi-polar conceptions without fully formulating those aspects as distinct factors constituting separate dimensions of the same problem. Thus students mention alternative viewpoints or conflicting information but don't represent the new position accurately or fully; or they express doubt about their views without being able to clearly say why.

Step 3: Multiplicity of Inequalities. Students begin recognize the multiplicity of factors legitimately involved in the issue of racism, and thus come affirm that racism is a complex problem composed of more than one factor. However, each of the multiplicity of factors is still viewed in dualistic terms, with no interrelations among the different factors. This structure is manifested through statements which specifically represent multiple viewpoints or multiple dimensions of the problem, including issues like the history of slavery, unequal job or educational opportunities, racist family environments, media stereotyping, etc., without specifically identifying ways in which any of these factors condition, modify, or lead to any of the others. Students at this level may be daunted by the complexity of the problem because, lacking connections among the factors, it appears as an overwhelming welter of individual problems.

Step 4: Partial System of Inequality. At Step 4, the individual begins to coordinate some of the multiple factors of the previous step to form partial understandings of the systematic relations among factors. One factor is now seen as specifically conditioning,

modifying, or resulting from other factors. This structure is manifested in a point of view that sees racism as a limited system of inequality in which factors such as the history of inequality, current social injustices, or unequal educational opportunities are understood as leading to or stemming from one another. Based on these partial relations, students begin forming their own independent hypotheses and arguments about the nature and causes of racism. However, the relations among the various factors or perspectives are not fully intercoordinated, and therefore the dimensions of the problem are not seen as fully relative to one another.

Step 5: Social-Systemic Racism. Individuals understand related social categories such as victim/victimizer or person/background, as systematically interrelated. They understand that oppressor-oppressed roles are relative to the position occupied in the system. Individuals at this level can thus understand notions such as systematic privilege, in which racial dominant groups in a society are given special status by their relation to others within a social hierarchy, and how this can reinforce and legitimate the prejudicial ideas and behaviors of individuals. This step parallels Perry's (1970) position of relativism or Fischer's (1980) level of abstract systems. As students begin to see the social-systemic character of racism, they become better able to recognize their own role as members of a racially dominant group.

Research Questions

If young adults gain more complex understandings of racism through the step-by-step construction of new concepts described above, we would expect to find an increase in developmental level reflected in their statements about the problem as they encounter new

information and divergent view points about the topic. To assess this prediction, a group of white undergraduate students, enrolled in a required cultural diversity course, were asked to respond in writing to questions about their conceptions of the nature and causes of racism, both before and after their participation in the one-semester class. Enrollment in the cultural diversity course ensured that they had experienced a sustained encounter with issues of diversity and racism, thus optimizing the chance of detecting a developmental change.

It should be noted that the purpose of this study was descriptive and exploratory, not experimental. The goal was not to assess the relative impact of the cultural diversity course on cognitive growth, a question whose answer would require, at minimum, a control group of non-exposed students. The goal of the present study was simply to describe the developmental status of, and developmental changes in the conceptions about racism held by a representative group of white undergraduates in the context of the kind of exposure to diversity afforded by cultural diversity coursework in a predominantly white college setting. A secondary goal was to generate a descriptive data set to serve as a basis from which to design more systematic follow-up research.

There were three primary research questions as follows. First, we wanted to derive an estimate of the students' relative developmental status with regard to conceptions of racism prior to taking the cultural diversity course. Would there be a wide range of developmental levels represented, perhaps corresponding to age and level of college experience, or would our white students who had not had much organized opportunity to think about racism generally tend to show primarily dualistic thinking on the topic?

The second question was whether or not students' conceptions of racism would grow

measurably in complexity during the period of one semester, in the context of organized cultural diversity coursework in a college setting. It was anticipated that an increase in the mean score from the beginning (T1) to the end of the semester (T2) would support the view that growth in the complexity of student concepts of racism is taking place, and would give us at least a rough indication of the degree of that growth within a given time period under the given conditions. A negative finding would suggest a regression to less complex forms of thinking. Such a finding would require follow-up research to determine whether the college experience is ultimately detrimental or whether temporary regression in the face of new ideas is a prelude to eventual integration and progress to more complex thinking. A zero finding would be the least informative of the possible outcomes, and would require refinement of the instrument and extension of the assessment period to determine whether the zero finding were indicative of a lack of cognitive growth in this domain, or simply a lack of sensitivity in the measurement techniques.

Finally, the third question involved the degree to which the student's age or amount of college experience might affect any observed developmental changes over the semester, or their developmental status at the end of the semester. Specifically, would older or more experienced students make greater conceptual gains, or would relative developmental progress be independent of age and experience, suggesting the need to look elsewhere for factors contributing to conceptual development in this domain?

Methods

Subjects

The subjects consisted of 55 white undergraduate students, including 45 females and

10 males. The students' ages ranged from 18.1 to 22.9 years, a span of 4.1 years, with a mean of 19.5 and median of 19.1 years. Of the 55 subjects, 31 (56.4%) were first-year students, 10 (18.2%) were sophomores, another 10 (18.2%) were juniors, and 4 (7.3%) were seniors. All subjects were enrolled in one of two sections of a course on cultural diversity taught at a major private university in the northeastern United States. The course was required of all education majors and fulfilled a university-wide cultural diversity requirement for non-education majors as well. The majority of subjects were education majors, but the sample included a substantial number of non-education majors as well.

Procedures

A written questionnaire was administered to each of the two course sections on the first day and last day of the course, with the assurance that responses would be anonymous and would in no way affect their grades. The questionnaire consisted of two open-ended questions, one about the nature of racism (Question A) and another about its causes (Question B). Student's hand-written responses varied in length from one sentence to about one-half page. The total corpus of data included 220 responses consisting of 2 written responses (nature and cause) on each 110 questionnaires, of which 55 were collected at Time 1 and 55 at Time 2.

Five independent coders scored the responses according to coding rules derived from the 5-step developmental scale. To refine the coding rules, a subset of 15 questionnaires (a total of 30 responses, 15 nature and 15 cause) were randomly selected from the Time 1 questionnaires. Each of the five coders read each response in its entirety and assigned it to one of the 5 developmental steps. Responses containing statements assignable to more than

one developmental step were assigned to the highest step demonstrated. Coding differences were negotiated, and coding rules revised until coders reached .87 percent agreement for the last 10 responses coded. The remaining 95 questionnaires (190 responses) were then randomized to blind the coders as to whether responses were given at Time 1 or Time 2. Each response was then read and scored independently by a minimum of three and a maximum of five independent coders, with disagreements negotiated. On each questionnaire, the nature response was coded first, and the cause response was code second.

For the 190 responses not included in the development of coding rules, the inter-rater reliability, calculated as the percentage of agreements among all coders, was 81%. These 190 responses were then pooled with the original 30 responses used to develop coding rules to restore the data set to a total of 220 responses.

Results

There were four sets of findings of relevance to our research questions. The first relates to the question of the students' level of understanding at the beginning of the semester. At Time 1, the mean developmental step of responses to Question A (nature of racism) was 1.38 with a standard deviation of .76; the mean for Question B (causes of racism) was 1.44 with a standard deviation of .81. As Table 1 shows, the great majority of the students in our sample responded at the lower end of the scale at Time 1. Three-quarters of the responses both Question A (nature of racism) and Question B (causes of racism) were Step-1, with about one-quarter of the responses at Steps 2 and 3. Sixty-five percent of the students (36) gave Step-1 responses to both Question A and B. The highest response at Time 1 was a single subject who scored at Step 3 and 4 on questions A & B, respectively. The

frequency of each score at Time 1 is given in Table 1 which compares the distributions at Time 1 and Time 2 (the Time 2 distribution is addressed below). The distribution of scores represented in Table 1 is illustrated in Figure 1a-b where scores for Time 1 are represented by the black bars and Time 2 by grey bars.

The second set of findings involves the nature of the change in subjects' responses between Time 1 and Time 2. At Time 2, the mean score on Question A had increased to 2.1 (sd = 1.1), a mean gain of .67 steps (sd = 1.1). On Question B the mean score had increased to 2.3 (sd = 1.1), for a mean gain of .85 steps (sd = 1.2). To assess the significance of these gains, the mean scores at Times 1 and 2 were compared using a paired-comparisons T-test based on difference scores (SAS, 1985). Results indicated that the difference in mean developmental step between Time 1 and 2 was significant for both Question A ($T = 4.38$, $p > .0001$) and Question B ($T = 5.31$, $p < .0001$) responses.

As Table 1 shows, by Time 2 the proportion of Step 1 scores had dropped from three-fourths to less than one half for both Parts A and B, resulting in a much less skewed distribution. Since the proportion of Step 2 responses remained about the same and there were no Step 5 responses, most of the gain in scores at Time 2 is accounted for by an increase in the frequency of Step 3 and 4 responses, a pattern that held for both Parts A and B. This pattern can also be seen in Figure 1 which shows the relative increase in the proportion of Step 3 and 4 responses at Time 2. This difference in proportions could not be assessed statistically because the number of responses per cell were too few for a valid Chi-square test.

Since overall increases in proportions of mean scores may disguise the number,

magnitude, and direction of individual changes, individual change scores were computed and tabulated for each subject's responses to Question A and B. These tabulations showed that there were only 3 cases (5.5%) of negative change on each question. A total of 24 subjects (43.6%) showed gains on Question A, with 10 (18.2%) gaining 1 step, 10 (18.2%) gaining 2 steps, and 4 (7.3%) showing a 3-step gain. Question B showed a similar pattern with 29 students making gains over the semester including 11 students (20.0%) gaining 1 step, 13 (23.6%) gaining 2 steps, and 5 (9.1%) gaining 3 steps. However, a total of 28 (50.9%) and 23 (41.8%) of the students showed no change on Questions A or B respectively. Thus, although the number of reversals appeared negligible, the gains in group mean scores from Time 1 to Time 2 were accounted for by increases in a little less than half the individual cases.

In order to analyze the students' overall understanding of the concept of racism, composite scores were computed as follows. Since T-tests showed no significant difference between the group means for Questions A and B, either at Time 1 ($T = -0.52$, $p < .61$) or Time 2 ($T = -1.52$, $p < .13$), and the patterns of distribution and change (Figure 1) were similar as discussed above, the scores for Questions A and B were collapsed by averaging. This average represents the underlying understanding tapped by both nature and cause questions. Then the difference between the average scores at Time 1 and Time 2 was computed to obtain a composite change score for each subject.

Because the composite score includes information both Questions A and B, it provides a better reflection of change in the developmental status of individual students. Overall, 35 of the students (64%) showed some gain in composite score, 17 showed no change, and 3 (5%)

showed some decrease in composite score. The mean gain in composite score for the whole group was .76 steps. When students who showed no gain were excluded, the mean gain was 1.3 steps. Furthermore, regression analyses showed that this mean change of .76 steps was statistically significant ($p < .0001$, $R2 = .04$) controlling for age, gender, and year in school.

Finally, a third set of findings address the question of degree to which age and college experience contribute to relative developmental change and to relative developmental status before and after the course. To assess these relationships, three regression analyses were performed. The purpose of the first regression analysis was to determine whether the students' ages or relative of amount of college experience might play a role in the degree of developmental change they showed over the course of the semester. Composite change scores were treated as the dependent measure, with age and year in college as independent variables. Although there were too few males ($n = 10$) to make sex a meaningful predictor, it was included in the model to control for possible effects due this imbalance. Results showed no significant relationship between change scores and either age or years in college, controlling for sex ($p = .98$ and .86, respectively). Thus, for students in the present sample, the degree of developmental change over the semester did not appear to depend on how old the student was at the beginning of the course or how much experience they had in college.

Next, two regression analyses were conducted to determine whether either of these predictor variables might be related either to students' initial developmental level at the start of the semester, or to their final developmental level at the end of the semester. In the first analysis, average developmental scores at Time 1 were regressed on age and year in college, once again controlling for sex. In the second regression analysis, Developmental status at

Time 2 was modeled on the same set of factors. Again, there were no significant relationships between either dependent variable and the two predictors of age and year ($p=.11$ and .21, respectively for Time 1 and .25 and .28 for Time 2). Thus, controlling for sex, the developmental level of student's conceptions of racism was not found to depend on either the students' ages or their relative experience in college.

Discussion, Conclusions, and Implications

Although our findings must be treated as preliminary, we may draw some tentative conclusions and suggest some implications contingent upon substantiation by further research. First, the fact that the vast proportion of the college undergraduates in this study responded at Step 1 in the first assessment supports the view that white middle class college students--especially first and second year students--tend to think about the complex phenomena of racism in terms of simple abstractions or the kind of dualisms that have been found to characterize the thinking of young college students in other complex domains (Fischer, Hand, & Russell, 1984; Kitchener & King, 1981; Kitchener & Fischer, 1990; Perry, 1970). At the beginning of the semester, most students saw the complex social phenomenon of racism as basically a problem of individual prejudice, reducing it to the "racist" beliefs or actions of a few individuals. Their responses showed no evidence of a conceptual grasp of the connections between prejudice and larger social, institutional, or cultural forces. Moreover, these students' responses portrayed the causes of racism as residing in outside forces, including modeling by parents and stereotyping in entertainment and the news media. Reminiscent of students at Perry's Position 1, Kitchener's Stage 1, and Belenky's level of "received knowledge," who view knowledge as something passively received from outside

authorities, the students showed little sense of the possibility of their own involvement either in terms of collusion with or resistance to the operation of racism in their everyday lives.

However, the present findings also support the view that white middle class college students can develop more complex conceptualizations, incorporating the systemic properties of racism and beginning to see its connection to their own lives and the society in which they live. An average gain of nearly one step was observed for the group as a whole, about half of the students showed growth of at least one step, and over a quarter of the students made two- or three-step gains. Although none of the students showed a Step-5 conceptualization, each step of observed gain represents a qualitative advance in their ability to incorporate additional dimensions of the problem into their spontaneous definitions and causal explanations. Those students who scored at Steps 2, 3, and 4 demonstrated an ability to spontaneously generate conceptions about the nature and causes of racism that reflect increasingly complex dimensions of the problem. These dimensions include the representation of viewpoints other than their own on the topic and links between their initial dualistic conception and complicating factors such as conceptions of social class or race-based social privileges. Moreover, only three students showed negative change on the composite score. Whether these negative responses represent genuine regression or measurement error, the overwhelmingly positive direction of the change provides support for the general hypothesis of a step-wise growth in the complexity of students' conceptions of racism.

At the same time, however, it is important to note that about one third of the students showed no developmental gains in understanding the concept. There are several plausible interpretations of this finding. First, it could suggest some of the limitations of the cultural

diversity course as a focal tool in promoting interracial understanding in all students. Second, those who did not progress on our scale could also be the ones who have the strongest personal affective resistance for whatever reason, interacting with, and in this case hindering, their cognitive growth. Finally, we could hypothesize, following Perry (1970) that some of these students are experiencing a kind of lateral growth, consolidating and assimilating information and experience to their present structure, and building a foundation for the next qualitative or vertical shift. In this broad view, development may be taking place even in the absence of direct progress in the sequential scale. Further research is needed to distinguish among these interpretations.

Given that white college students are capable of significant developmental growth in their conceptions of racism within the context of cultural diversity coursework, an important further question is whether such developmental change may be dependent upon that specific context or whether it takes place more or less "naturally" in the broader context of their college experience. In previous studies, college student's ability to conceptualize complex problems was found to grow as a function either of age (Kitchener & King, 1981; Kohlberg & Kramer, 1969), or general college experience (Perry, 1970). In this light, the present findings that neither age nor college experience were related to either developmental status or degree of conceptual growth, seem to suggest that development in this domain may be highly dependent on sustained appropriate social contextual support--whether in the form of cultural diversity coursework or other interventions.

Indeed, it should not be surprising that growth in white students' conceptions of racism would typically be restricted to contexts in which the issues are highly salient. The

students in studies by Perry (1970) and by Kitchener and King (1981) were confronted with issues of the nature of knowledge on a daily basis as they were presented with conflicting statements by "expert" professors, and with dilemmas over the fairness of grades assigned to opinion papers. The situation regarding racism is in many ways the opposite. Racism is commonly treated as a "taboo" subject in the U.S., and is seldom discussed in any in-depth manner outside of specialized courses in cultural diversity or race relations. Moreover, white middle class students are typically isolated from on-going encounters with students of color by the defacto segregation of campus life and the larger US society, and lack opportunities to discuss racism in classes where predominantly white instructors tend to avoid the issue. In this regard, it seems significant to note that none of the students in the present sample reached Step 5, a level comparable to Perry's position of relativism.

However, a limitation of the present data is that the juniors and seniors in the present sample were not as well represented as first- and second- year students. For this reason, the finding of no age or college experience effects must be take with caution. It is possible that with a better representation of older, more experienced students, a relationship between age, experience, and conceptualization of racism might emerge independently of the context of the cultural diversity coursework. A test of that question will require further research in which older and more experienced students are better represented, and comparative samples of students exposed and not-exposed to cultural diversity coursework are examined.

In conclusion, although the present findings remain tentative, they support the view that in addition to the affective or identity issues that confront white students in their attempts to come to grips with racism, there is a very real cognitive dimension to the problem. Not

only must Whites transcend their identification with the privilege and power granted by a system of race-based social inequities; they must also actively reconceptualize the problem as systemic in nature and be able to conceive of themselves in terms of the roles the system has cast them in. Indeed, most models of racial identity development (Helms, 1985; Ponterotto, 1988) portray the growth of healthy White identity as a process in which individuals come to recognize their own role within a racist social order--a recognition that forms the basis for anti-racist action. From this perspective, the cognitive ability to conceptualize racism as a systematic process may be indispensable to the healthy development of White identity and effective anti-racist action. This cognitive interpretation, however, need not be seen as opposed to identity development interpretations of white student development in relation to race and racism, but may provide an additional avenue of approach for educational and counseling interventions.

In addition, the cognitive dimension of the problem sheds some additional light on the "resistance" that counselors and higher education professionals have often reported among white students learning about racism and cultural difference. This phenomenon has typically been interpreted affectively as due to either fear of a "taboo" subject or attempts to preserve racial identity status (Tatum, 1990; Helms, 1990). The present findings point to the possibility that some of the resistance to learning about complex social problems like racism may be due to the cognitive level of the student with respect to this domain. Like Perry's Position 1 students who "resisted" the complexities of their liberal education by assimilating them to their dualistic frameworks, our Step-1 students may be resisting the complexities of the problem by reducing it to dualistic terms.

This cognitive perspective should not, however, be interpreted as a suggestion that white students should be absolved of their responsibility for learning about and taking action against racism in their own lives, simply because they have difficulty understanding the issues at first. On the contrary, we take a contextualist view of development that sees conceptual development as an inextricable part of the social reality (Bidell & Fischer, 1993; Rogoff, 1982; Vygotsky, 1987) because they are constructed through participation or in socially and culturally organized contexts. If young adults entering college think dualistically about problems such as racism, the appropriate response to provide the kind of contextual support needed to sustain further development.

Instructional and other forms of interventions must take into account that students will not all be coming in at the same level, and that many white students will have encountered few previous opportunities to deal with issues of racism. However, the fact of differential developmental levels should not lead teachers into a "readiness" approach of waiting for people to develop before we can teach them (Bidell & Fischer, 1993) or "Socratic" type approaches of challenging and attempting to refute student ideas. Instead, contemporary findings of contextual effects in cognitive development suggest that people achieve their highest levels of thinking in situations of high social support (Rogoff, 1990; Kitchener & Fischer, 1990; Kitchener, Lynch, Fischer, & Wood, 1993). These findings support recent "connected," or relational models of teaching (e.g., Belenky, et. al.. 1986) in which the role of the teacher is to support the students' efforts to make sense of new ideas and alternative perspectives, building on earlier conceptual achievements to construct new, more complex ones. The present model suggests that to construct more complex and adequate conceptions

of racism, young adults need both exposure to accurate information about race and racism needed to build appropriate abstractions, and structured opportunities to step back and reflect on their ideas and experiences in a supportive environment.

Indeed, if the present model of young adult development in this domain is correct, white college students face a critical developmental crossroads. These young adults appear to enter college with the nascent ability for the abstract thinking needed to begin constructing an understanding of the complexities of the social systems around them. Whether they succeed may be largely a function of the support available in the college context in which they do this cognitive work. Without adequate support they are at risk of assimilating the complexities of racism and race relations to dualistic schemes, resulting in a cognitive "foreclosure" that writes off the possibility of effective participation in anti-racist activity. With appropriate support and information, they have the capability of understanding the nature of racism and therefore acting effectively against it.

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Table 1

The Frequency of Five Developmental Responses to the Nature and Cause Questions at Time 1 and Time 2

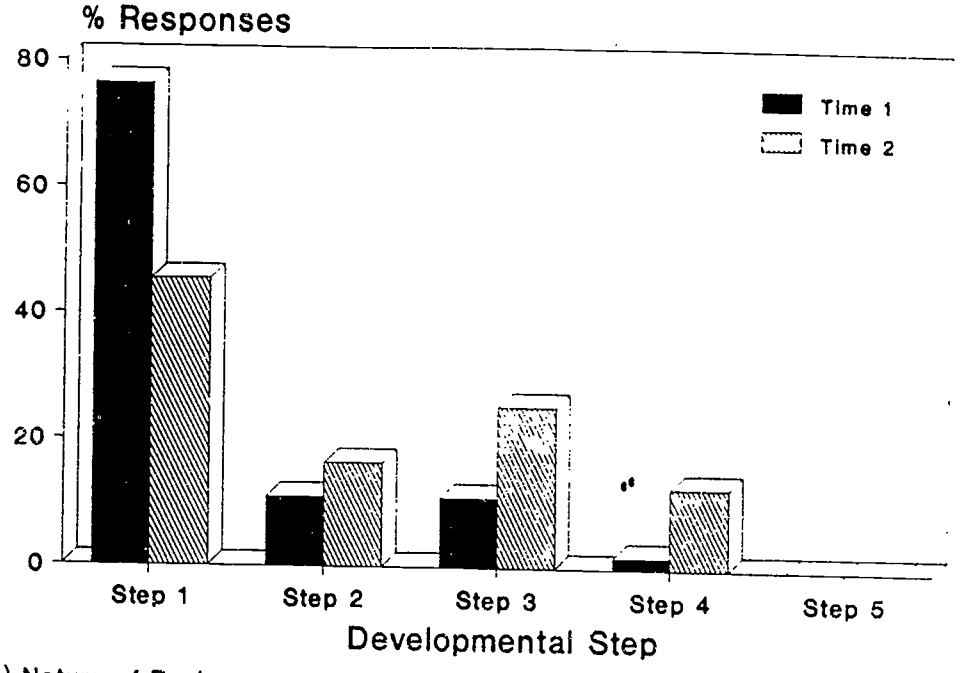
Developmental Step	Time 1		Time 2	
	Nature	Cause	Nature	Cause
1	42 (76.4)	41 (74.5)	25 (45.5)	21 (38.2)
2	6 (10.9)	5 (9.1)	9 (16.4)	5 (9.1)
3	6 (10.9)	8 (14.5)	14 (25.5)	21 (38.2)
4	1 (1.8)	1 (1.8)	7 (12.7)	8 (14.5)
5	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)

Table 2

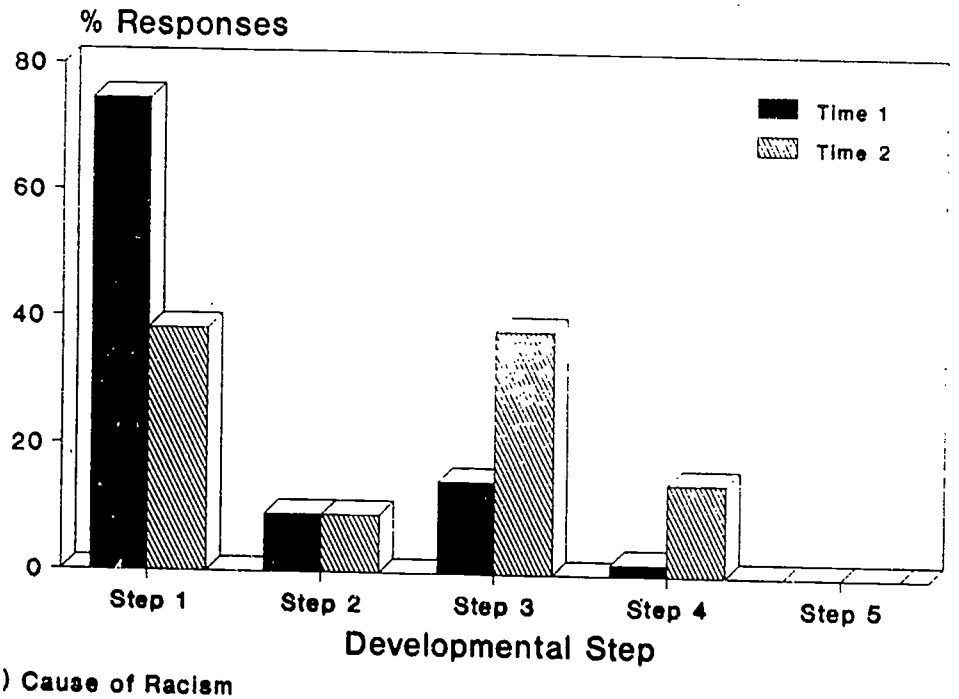
The Frequency, Direction, and Magnitude of Change Scores for Questions A and B

Direction & Magnitude	Delta A		Delta B	
	N	%	N	%
-2	2	3.6	2	3.6
-1	1	1.8	1	1.8
0	28	50.9	23	41.8
1	10	18.2	11	20.0
2	10	18.2	13	23.6
3	4	7.3	5	9.1

Figure 1. Distribution of responses to questions about the nature (A) and the causes (B) of racism at Time 1 and Time 2.



(a) Nature of Racism



(b) Cause of Racism